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Realism and Fantasy in Art, History, and Geography

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Abstract. Realism may be necessary to survival, but unless people are also touched by fantasy, they risk imprisonment in their own narrow worlds. Too much fantasy, however, can lead to isolation, to a frivolous and—ultimately—insane existence. Art, history, and geography are three intellectual-imaginative projects, all of which are imbued with varying degrees of realism and fantasy. Art, predictably, is most favorably inclined toward the uninhibited imagination: we see fantasy in the paintings of young children and playfulness in much of the works of contemporary artists. Nevertheless, in the West, art has also favored realism—that is, optical fidelity—throughout the early modern period. Treatments of the past come second in their hospitality to flights of the imagination: a consciousness of the past may give rise in one people to realistic narratives (history), but in another people, it can generate fantastic myths and legends without risking their physical survival or even their cultural efflorescence. Geography, in contrast to representational art and accurate history, is necessary to survival. Geography is universally realistic. Yet it is also rich in fantasy. Realism and fantasy are constituent elements of the human world. Geography, for all its realism, would be a sterile subject without the occasional tug of fantasy and a useless subject without, in some sense, a prognostication of "utopia" in it. The nature of geography can be illuminated in a variety of ways. One way is to compare it with the aspirations and achievements of art and history.

Key Words: realism, fantasy, art, history, geography, myth, imagination.

REALISM and fantasy are traits found in both individuals and cultures. In Western society, we readily say of some individuals that they are realistic and of others that they tend to have their heads in the clouds; we also believe that some cultures are more pragmatic, more inclined to pursue narrow economic ends, than are others. "Realistic" and "fantastic" are terms of common speech, the meaning of which is seldom neutral. When we use them in common speech, judgment is almost always implied. Realism is generally deemed good, for without it human survival is hardly possible; yet it also suggests narrowness or a lack of imagination. Fantasy, because it may be unique to the human species, is a trait of which humans can be especially proud; yet it can seem mere ineffectual fluff, or, if it has some power in directing people's energies, it can lead them astray (Lewis 1961, 57–73; Nochlin 1971).[1]

My principal thesis is this: to understand human reality better, it helps to see people and their works as compounded of realism and fantasy. The concepts captured by these two words give us a handle to explore human nature and culture. It is, however, a slippery handle, for although "realism" and "fantasy" have clear and opposite meanings conceptually, their application to real-life situations is often ambiguous and problematical. A point of view or a pattern of behavior that appears realistic can seem, with a shift in perspective, fantastic, and vice-versa. If this is the case, we would do well to hesitate before placing people or a cultural manifestation in the camp of realism or of fantasy. A subsidiary thesis is that fantasy, suspect as it must be in the endeavors of normal scholarship, is not to be dismissed outright even in the name of truth; moreover, fantasy merits serious study because it plays a key role in the enlivenment and transformation of culture.

One common notion of a realist is that he or she is a stickler for facts. A cabdriver, when he learns that I teach geography, proudly tells me that he can name all the county seats of Wisconsin and that he intends to expand his place-

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name knowledge to cover the whole of the United States. The cabdriver considers himself a hard-nosed person—a realist in the nontechnical sense of that word, but all I can say in response to his boast is, "Fantastic!" My response, which came to me naturally, suggests that realism or being realistic is not a clear idea even in the commonplaces of verbal exchange.

All humans have and use their imagination. Even the most fact-driven martinets must resort to images and ideas if they are to make any kind of ambitious plan. The ability to marshal facts and see their significance is itself an imaginative or creative act. Some people, even as they take pride in being eminently practical, may also wish to be known as imaginative, at least in their own specialized fields of activity. Such people, however, are inclined to withhold their approval from fictional works of fantasy, for example, stories of talking animals or of extraterrestrials, and those myths and legends that touch common-day facts only tangentially. To them, such works are vestiges of a more naive age, or they are light entertainments, unworthy of an adult's serious attention because they depart too far from what the world is really like. Self-proclaimed realists also tend to be suspicious of the more abstract forms of modern art, finding them willful and pointless. Abstract art, as they see it, is the irresponsible fantasy of our age, just as fairy tales and myths were the irresponsible fantasies of earlier ages. This is a possible view, which has been put forward from time to time. It might be dismissed as mere bias. But if we do not so dismiss it—if, on the contrary, we look sympathetically upon fairy tales, legends, and other seemingly ungrounded pictures of the world, is it because we have a fondness for escapism, or is it because we find that they cannot be rigidly separated from the real and that they, directly or indirectly, even contribute to our understanding of the real? Does it make sense to distinguish between responsible imagination and irresponsible fantasy? How does one draw the line?

These questions have an enduring interest for all students of human nature and culture—geographers included. Although they are large and difficult questions, they can be elucidated if not actually resolved if we examine a set of intellectual-imaginative projects in which the terms "realism" and "fantasy" emerge naturally. Geography is such a project. But to properly appreciate the role of realism and fantasy in geography, I see an advantage in showing first how these concepts apply to pictorial art, which has captured the geographer's attention for the light it throws on the idea of landscape, and to narrative history, which the geographer has traditionally regarded as a closely related discipline. I shall show that pictorial art, narrative history, and geography represent a gradation in realism: the project's necessity to survival and its component of realism increase as we move from one end of the gradation to the other.

Children's Art

Views concerning the value of children's art have changed radically in the twentieth century. At one time, a common view was that the sketches and paintings of the very young are crude, hardly worth the name of art, but that as they reach the age of six or seven their skills improve and they can draw figures and landscapes of commendable realism. A later view, one that is still regnant, reverses the judgment. Preschoolers, it is said, often show astonishing creativity. Their works, though not realistic, are highly expressive. By the time children enter school, they start to lose this creativity and become realists, devoted to copying what they can see. The older children tend to disown their past works as infantile, and take pride in their present achievement in realism.

Howard Gardner (1982) and his coworkers offer, tentatively, a third view. Preschoolers, they say, do indeed often produce bold and vivid works, which their parents and teachers justifiably admire, but such children are not therefore artists in the sense that adult artists are artists. Preschoolers are not trying to produce works that evoke a mood, tone, or value—an aesthetic quality. Their greatest joy seems to lie in the action itself, in making a clear impact on a blank sheet of paper. They are, as Piaget (1969, 166–68) would put it, egocentric and uncritical. They tend to assume, rather than make an effort to ascertain, that what they produce has meaning not only to themselves but to others. By the time children reach age five or six, the egocentric shells that formerly define their world begin to break. One

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evidence is their greater desire to know about and to depict the "things out there." When they draw or paint, they want to communicate a common reality, and they know they cannot do so by taking the paths of their younger selves.

Children in time become suspicious of unrepresentational art and of those striking metaphors that they once invented so uninhibitedly. Adults may bemoan the change as a loss of imagination. Yet, as Gardner and others have noted, it is at this stage in life that children are able to see expressive qualities in pictures of figures and landscapes, and in the lines, shapes, and colors of nature (H. Gardner 1982, 91–102; Honkavaara 1961, 27–72; Lindstrom 1957). Older children, as they embrace realism, are at the same time more open to aesthetic experience. Indeed, this heightened aesthetic sensibility may contribute to the general decline of artistic production during teenage years. Teenagers, unless they are exceptionally talented, are too conscious of the achievements in art and of the beauty of the world to believe that they can replicate them with any degree of success (H. Gardner 1982, 88–90).

Playfulness and imaginative exuberance are qualities found in healthy young children throughout the world. Synesthesia, that is to say, the blending of sensory experiences such that the stimulus of one sense (say, hearing) can activate another (say, color vision), is common among young children. Synesthesia encourages young children to talk nonsense (e.g., "What a crumbly yellow voice you have!"), to speak in vivid metaphors, and to play multi-modally—that is, a child readily sings as she draws, dances while she sings (H. Gardner 1982, 128; Marks 1978, 48–52; Tuan 1978, 363–72). The "creativity" we note in young children's art is thus part of this general undiscriminating playfulness, which in turn rests on their strong synesthetic tendency. Fanciful play is a necessary stage in children's growth, and so is the next stage of realism. But realism need not be manifest in pictorial art; it can be—and it usually is—manifest in social behavior and speech. Realism in the pictorial art of school-age European and American children is thus a cultural phenomenon. It is not in itself necessary to maturation. Its prominence in Western juvenile art is a consequence of the high value placed on faithfulness to the eye in an extended period, approximately from 1400 to 1850, in Europe's past.

Realism in Western Art

During this period, realism was not, of course, the only value; more purely aesthetic ones such as composition, balance, texture, and expressivity were at least equally if not more important in the eyes of artists and art critics. Nevertheless, throughout this period there was a consistent effort to achieve optical fidelity, that is, to depict faithfully what the eyes see rather than what the mind knows. Realism in pictorial art presupposes that people in the same culture, or even in different cultures, see the world in roughly the same way. A broken pot, a boy playing with a stick, a patch of grass bordered by a clump of trees, and other such common things and events look much the same to normally sighted humans, whether they are Chinese, French or Bantu. The challenge lies not in the seeing but in the manipulation, that is, in the ability to make likenesses of the visible world that might deceive the eye (Danto 1986, 89–91).

European artists, since the Renaissance, have taken up the challenge in earnest (Gombrich 1962, 9–12). Painters strove to improve their skill by exploring techniques of foreshortening and chiaroscuro and by making use of the discoveries of the new sciences of projective geometry and optics. According to Thomas Kuhn (1970, 161), "in early modern Europe, painting was regarded as *the* cumulative discipline." It was the model of progress in human affairs. Toward the end of the period, an artist like Constable could perhaps claim that painters have had better success in achieving optical fidelity than natural philosophers, in their logical and scientific formulations, have achieved fidelity to the abstract relations of nature. With growing success, however, artists were faced with the question of what new challenges to assume. One modernist answer is to strive for some higher reality than can be recorded by mere technique or the camera. Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) tells the famous anecdote of how he walked into his studio one night and failed to recognize one of his own paintings that was lying the wrong way up; yet it struck him as "of extraordinary beauty glowing with an inner radiance." Kandinsky did not completely repudiate representation, but he did argue that the pure artist should seek to express

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only "inner and essential" feelings (Chilvers et al. 1988, 262).

Certain modern artists of great prestige and influence have continued to pay homage to realism, even though their works, to an unsympathetic critic's eye, seem to show obvious distortions. Picasso (Ashton 1988, 18), when accused by a critic of painting pictures that are "monstrous" and "inhuman," responds in an interview in 1945: "This [criticism] surprises me because on the contrary I always try to observe nature. As you can see, I've put in this still-life a box of leeks . . . I wanted my canvas to smell of leeks. I insist on likeness, a more profound likeness, more real than the real." Artists have firmly resisted the notion that what they do is willful or arbitrary—that their works are self-indulgent fantasies. For all their egotism, they like to consider themselves receptive—open to experiences and things in the world rather than hunting them down. Picasso exemplifies this attitude when he says that, in painting, his purpose is to show what he has found, not what he is looking for, and that "one cannot go against nature, [for] it is stronger than the strongest man" (Ashton 1988, 3, 9). Rodin (1984, 12), too, wishes to protect himself against the accusation of departing from nature, that is, of engaging in fantasy. Even when he is laboring over a sculpture that shows clear distortions, he asserts: "In everything, I obey Nature, and never do I dare give orders to it. My only ambition is servile fidelity to it."

Nevertheless, once optical duplication is no longer an ideal, once art departs from trying to embody feeling and mood in common objects, once the artist turns away from enthrallment by apples and rocks to look ever more inward to—as Kandinsky puts it—the "inner and essential" feelings, the world of art fragments into numerous programs and schools. These can exist more or less at the same time, or they can follow one another in quick succession. In our own century, we have seen: "Fauvism, the Cubisms, Futurism, Vorticism, Synchronism, Abstractionism, Surrealism, Dada, Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop, Op, Minimalism, Post-Minimalism, Conceptualism, Photorealism, Abstract Realism, Neo-Expressionism—simply to list some of the more familiar ones" (Danto 1986, 108). Of course, not all these fashions and schools are abstract: Photorealism and Pop may depict in realistic detail the most mundane objects. Still, it was the inward psychological turn at the beginning of the century, and the self-consciousness associated with that turn, that led to the fragmentation.

What are the consequences of this fragmentation? One consequence is the severance of art from the aspirations of science and technology. While science and technology continue to pursue and manipulate the real, art has moved into an array of other directions, some of which may still be entitled to the label "real" or "superreal"; others make no such pretense except perhaps in some psychological or metaphysical sense. A further consequence of this fragmentation and of the divorce of art from the scientific enterprise of understanding nature is the widespread feeling that modern art is undisciplined. Modern artists appear to live in their own separate bubbles of fantasy. When one bubble breaks, another quickly takes its place and glitters a year or two in the sun. Those that exist simultaneously are themselves incommensurable. Harsh criticism has been directed at such works, not all of it from philistines (Berenson 1953, 68; Clark 1963, 28–36; Barzun 1989, 350–51). On the other hand, people who favor modern art and its protean forms may well apply quite a different set of epithets, such as playful, creative, and tolerant. Fantasy then assumes a positive meaning: it is seen as uniquely and quintessentially human.

We have noted earlier that children in the Western world abandon free expression for the discipline of realistic portrayal by the time they enter school. We have also noted that adult artists in the Western world took up the challenge of perceptual fidelity as an aesthetic and scientific ideal, which they eventually abandoned in favor of freer expression. Before perceptual fidelity became a major goal of artists during the early modern period, it was successfully pursued only by the ancient Greeks, according to E. H. Gombrich (1962, 120–25). Among non-Western peoples, Chinese and Japanese artists have recognized its enduring lure (Danto 1986, 90–91). Examples of realistic portrayal can also be found in the artworks of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Crete, and no doubt in other cultures as well.

Although non-Western peoples have taken up realism in art with varying degrees of commitment, they have not made it their central task, sustained over the centuries. In their works, rare indeed is the faithful depiction of whole landscapes rather than, simply, individual ob-

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jects (Huxley 1962, 41–47).[2] Civilizations such as Hindu and Islam have produced great art objects without making a fetish of reproducing likenesses of the visible world (Coomaraswamy 1964; Arnold 1965). Any general survey of the world's pictorial and sculptural art will show the relative unimportance of optical fidelity, especially as it applies to landscape: one need only think of the nonrepresentational traditions of American Indians, West Africans, Australian Aborigines, and the often sketchy depictions of human figures among the Chinese, even though their tradition does encourage visual faithfulness in the portrayal of plants and animals (Sowerby 1940). Moreover, even in the West, producing true likenesses is the dominant concern of only a period, and within that period it is far from being the only criterion of artistic excellence. Generally speaking, what motivates and drives artistic endeavor is an imagination, bold at times to the point of waywardness, that strives to embody the "felt power" in things rather than their accurate portrayal.

History and Myth

In Europe, the challenge of optical fidelity was taken up seriously during the Renaissance. We may ask, Why then? Gombrich (1982, 20–21) believes that one possible reason for the turn toward realism around 1400 was a change in what constitutes plausibility in the narration of sacred events. For a pictorial narration of sacred events to be plausible, the images must seem those of an eye-witness. Renaissance viewers, unlike their medieval forebears, want to know what it is like to be present at, say, the Last Supper. A conceptual or hieroglyphic style of presentation cannot hope to satisfy this desire to relive the past. We are at the beginning of a renewed interest in history. Let us turn then from pictorial accuracy to the desire for accuracy in narration.

Some literate societies, we know, have a well-developed sense of history, others not. Historical consciousness is manifest as a serious concern for the personalities and events of the past and an attempt to see pattern in them. It implies an interest in individuals—their careers and fate, and a desire to understand the present social order in the light of its antecedents. A keen sense of history is part of a more general thirst to know, which, though it may be pure, is more often prompted and guided by practical needs. Historians in different cultures, especially those who have served in some official capacity, tend to assume that their works have practical value. But history cannot really be useful unless it is grounded in geography and social science. Societies rich in formal historical knowledge (that is, knowledge based on the evidence of documents, oral tradition, and material objects) are, predictably, also rich in explanatory descriptions of land and resources, peoples and customs, and how institutions work.

To return to the question, Why have only some literate societies taken up the challenge of providing a realistic account of the past? Donald Brown (1988), in an ambitious study that marshals evidence from a score of historical cases, concludes that the answer lies in the nature of the social hierarchy. Literate societies differ in that whereas some are dominated by hereditary social orders, others have social orders that are more open. India is an outstanding example of the former, China of the latter. Indian civilization is rich in legends and myths but poor in historical and geographical descriptions based on facts; with China, it is the reverse. India is a caste-ridden society; China, by contrast, has permeable social borders. Members of India's high caste are endowed with supernatural attributes supported by fabulous stories and genealogies. A Brahman's status derives from his birth, not from personal merit and a career of achievement. By contrast, the status of a Chinese official rests on his merit and virtue, attained through proper Confucian upbringing and formal education. Even the semi-mystical aura that surrounds the person of the emperor depends, ultimately, on tangible virtuous behavior and accomplishments rather than on the fact of royal descent. Through most of China's history, scholar-officials have shown a sustained interest in the rise and fall of individuals, families, and dynasties. They seem to feel that unless they know the historical antecedents in their concrete sociopolitical and geographical settings, they cannot truly understand the orderly processes of their own society and will not know how to maintain their position in it.

Given our modern bias in favor of social mobility and of histories that respect the known facts, we may be inclined to see Chinese culture as more just and rational than Indian culture:

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from a modern secular point of view, the one invites the favorable epithet of realism, the other the unfavorable one of fantasy. But such judgments are more obfuscatory than enlightening. One may argue, for instance, that colorful supernatural myths and legends are an achievement of Indian culture just as sober historical narratives are an achievement of Chinese culture. Both are "real" in the sense that each has provided indispensable support to a sociopolitical system of extraordinarily long duration. To sustain India's hereditary caste society, history is dispensable. To sustain China's despotic society—a despotism that nevertheless calls for sufficient social mobility to keep the vast bureaucracy alive—history has proven to be necessary (Brown 1988, 19–72).

Still, the objection may be raised that I have not addressed the question of truth. India's glorious myths and legends may be a tribute to the exuberantly creative human imagination or fantasy, but they are not true, whereas Chinese historical annals are true. The difference is there—an important one which I do not wish to blur. Nevertheless, in the late twentieth century, we are less certain than we were a hundred years ago of what truth in history means. Chinese historical writing, as native historians have openly admitted, has been highly selective. History was written with a moral purpose in mind and was meant to be of use—that is, to educate—the living (C. S. Gardner 1961, 13). All the facts collected to build up a historical account may be true and the narrative itself true as far as it goes, and yet be quite misleading for the omission of context. The thinness of a narration, a consequence of high selectivity, makes it into a sort of fable, all the more enthralling because its "inventive" character is disguised.

Chinese culture is empirical and down-to-earth only in a relative sense; relative, for instance, to the greater exuberance of Indian culture. China could not have become a "splendid empire" without its own share of imaginative constructions. Among them is the cosmic model of yin and yang and the five elements, which wields nature and human society into a harmonious whole. Appearing for the first time as a dominant worldview during the Han dynasty, its lingering effects can be discerned even in the modern age, some two thousand years later (Schwartz 1985, 350–82). Another highly imaginative construction is the Confucian ethos. Even more than the cosmic model, with which it has periodically merged, the Confucian ethos has permeated Chinese life and society, and it has done so for an even longer period of time.

But, one may well ask, in what sense is the Confucian ethos an inventive construction? Surely, it is common sense and the very opposite of fantasy when compared with not only Indian cosmology but with the far more restrained Chinese cosmic worldview. True, the core of Confucianism is commonsense: it is the mutual help and respect that are essential to small-group survival. But in the works of Confucius and Confucians, kinship relations and obligations have been refined and elevated so that hardly any trace remains of the harsh realities of necessity, power play, and evil that exist even in family life. Moreover, the cohesion, self-restraint, mutual help and deference that find their natural soil in small communities have been raised to the height of a universal principle, applicable to human associations at all scales (Tuan 1989, 38–49). The Chinese have sustained over the millennia a social myth that, in its more exalted aspects, verges on the fantastic. Yet it has great potency. Its acceptance by not only the governing elite but by a substantial portion of the common people has been a force of sufficient power to sustain a real but fragile unity in an empire of continental size. But, as Ray Huang (1989, 162–63, 192–99) notes, the Confucian social myth has also made it difficult for the Chinese bureaucracy to confront human conflicts that arise out of structural problems in the political economy rather than through deficiencies in human virtue.

Geography

We have seen that art can have, as one of its aims, realistic representation. History is by definition an attempt to tell truthfully what has happened to individuals and society in the past. Neither of these realisms is necessary to survival and cultural efflorescence. Now, what about geography? In one obvious sense, geographical knowledge is absolutely necessary to survival. Like all animals, humans must be able to appraise their environment realistically, but in contradistinction to them, humans can formalize this knowledge by symbolic means. Almost all people known to ethnography have systems of classifying plants and animals; they

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have a detailed knowledge of local resources—their location and seasonal availability; they know places (functional and ritual) intimately; they not only carry mental maps of geographical space in their head, but they can transcribe them into words, diagrams, and maps when necessary. Every human being is thus a geographer—an applied specialist of his or her environment. By contrast, although every human being may also be a storyteller, a creative genealogist, or a fabulist, only a few in select cultures and societies are historians. History, compared with geography, is an esoteric science.

I have drawn attention to the realism of geography. Knowledge so basic to human survival has to be "down-to-earth": overwhelmingly, the world's store of geographical knowledge is empirical—the where, how many, and how of things. Fantasy would appear to have no place in geography. Yet we know otherwise. How does fantasy enter? In what guises does it occur? Best known among geographical fantasies are the fabulous accounts of distant countries. Geographical realism, though universal, is confined to the home base. Where remote regions are concerned, the imagination can afford to take flight, since it is no longer tethered to practical needs. But this is the past. In our time, distant regions have lost their inaccessibility and remoteness; as a result, the imagination has lost its principal stimulus for the conjuration of monsters. Moreover, since almost every part of the earth's surface is known and accurate mapping of the globe in its entirety is a matter of time, geography would seem to have arrived at a critical stage similar to that of representational art, when optical fidelity is no longer a sufficient challenge. Will geography, like art, fragment into "a hundred schools"?[3]

I have noted earlier that although the use of the words "realism" and "fantasy" suggests the existence of opposed and irreconcilable categories, in fact what humans do can seldom be designated unambiguously as either the one or the other. In art, for instance, superrealism strives to depict objects with a minute and impersonal exactitude of detail. Paradoxically, such an excess of care can create a strong feeling of unreality. The effort to be precise passes imperceptibly from the real to the hyperreal and thence to the surreal or bizarre. In geography, as we have seen, the cabdriver who has memorized all the county seats of Wisconsin evokes the sort of admiration one reserves for the slightly mad. Geography risks becoming hyperreal and unreal even when it strives to be most prosaic, when it sticks to factual minutiae and is loaded with a surfeit of place-name and statistical information.

A widely accepted emblem of the geographer is the map. Maps, because they contain much useful and reliable data, contribute to the geographer's image as an empirically-minded, fact-bound fellow. Yet, some old maps have served as quasi-religious icons and others have had their margins inscribed with monsters. As for modern maps, cartographers are known to have exploited their works' appearance of objectivity to promote a particular point of view (Woodward 1985, 510–21; Harley 1988, 277–312). The map is more a work of the creative imagination than is popularly recognized. Its realism is problematical if only because the map is, after all, a picture of the earth seen from an infinite distance. It is a view from nowhere. What can be more fantastic? Yet humans have no trouble understanding it. Young children, even without explicit instruction, can easily see the earth from a position so high that the roof appears as a rectangle and the human person a round mop of hair (Blaut and Stea 1971, 387–93; Isaacs 1930, 37). Abstraction is natural to humans and congenial to their spirit, partly because it gives them power to command reality and partly because it promotes a sense of a shared world. Thus the map not only helps an individual to envisage the path from A to B, it also enables one person to tell another how to do so. What we call the impersonal or abstract world is also the world we can share in the performance of common tasks.

In sharp contrast to the view from nowhere is the view from somewhere. We have noted how early modern Western artists have tried to present the view as realistically as possible. Realism or optical fidelity is a criterion of excellence. But faithfulness to the seen means far more than optical geometry. The quality of an object—the warmth of a wool blanket, the light over a distant lake, the deadness of a carcass—is also to be portrayed. Realism in painting is paralleled by realism in such literary genres as the historical narrative, biography, autobiography, and the novel. All of them try to be factually accurate; or, as in the case of the novel, to give a strong impression of being so. But they also aspire to a realism of mood; it is their business to capture the spirit of time and place.

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Geography, as tales of exploration and travel writing, is a view from somewhere—a succession of somewheres, or standpoints, at which the explorer-writer pauses to record the lay of the land and the challenges ahead (Carter 1988). The plot is the temporal analogue of the perspectival view. Both dramatize—indeed, they tend to overdramatize—human reality by turning it into a quest.

Fantasy is a recurrent temptation of travel literature; it is, of course, also a principal source of that literature's appeal. Geographers who are also explorers have contributed to the travel literature: one thinks of Johann Reinhold Forster, Alexander von Humboldt, Elisée Reclus, Francis Younghusband, Sven Hedin, among others (Stoddart 1986, 142–57). By contrast, academic geographers have eschewed the view from somewhere: landscapes with horizons that evoke a sense of goal and of adventure do not seem to exist for them except in the letters they write home (Sauer 1963, 403). Even when geographers study a particular place, they tend to describe and understand it from an impersonal standpoint. Humans become abstractions and cannot engage in any quest other than the economic, with the inevitable consequence that their material environment too is drained of a great deal of substantiality and meaning. When geographers try to add experiential content to an abstracted reality by putting in the affective and aesthetic qualities of place, they gain the sort of realism known to landscape painters, novelists, and travel writers. But they risk losing the realism of the map and of the impersonal view; and they risk imputing to reality the subjective and transient mood or fancy of the author.

Fantasy: Pro and Con

Realism and fantasy are not labels that we can always unambiguously apply to art, literature, and human behavior. I have already noted that precision of statement, carried beyond a certain point, may sound more like the utterance of a madman than the utterance of a scientist devoted to truth. By contrast, the seemingly wild metaphors of a poet and the seemingly imprecise brush strokes of an impressionist painter may actually hew close to reality as some humans have experienced it. Despite such interpretive problems, a core of distinct meaning remains to each of the terms "realism" and "fantasy." In ordinary discourse, they are rarely a source of confusion. We know roughly what realism means in painting, in the novel, and in historical narrative. We know that people, to survive and prosper, must have geographies that are good representations of what is really out there. Even the most starry-eyed fantasist, if he or she is to continue to live, must be realistic enough to know where food and shelter are to be found. Realism is thus generally considered good. By contrast, fantasy has a more ambivalent meaning. The word is used to praise and to condemn. We need to look more closely at the pros and cons of fantasy.

One characteristic of fantasy, which gives it a negative tone, is its power to isolate an individual from community. A fantasist lives in a world of his or her own that cannot be shared easily because its elements are more or less arbitrarily thrown together. Young children's stories and drawings typically exhibit a certain disjointedness and wildness. If we are nonetheless pleased with their works, it is because they show the exuberance and confidence we like to see in the young, and because their works are embryonic displays of imagination and skill. In adults, the same indifference to the idea of a common reality and to communication with others is less well received.

Mere individual or cliquish opinion is suspect. People seek views and objectives that can be broadly shared and that seem to them real—grounded on common human facts and experience. Even modern artists may show a bias in favor of realism, loosely understood. To test whether this is true or not, try the following thought experiment. Imagine a tyrant who decrees that all aspiring students of art must be taught to paint with maximum optical fidelity. Many artists will no doubt rebel. But suppose, rather than the insistence on optical fidelity, he or she were to decree that all students adopt the singular viewpoint of, say, the Minimalist or Dadaist, would not they find this second prescription even more intolerable—more arbitrary and constraining? Apply now the thought experiment to geographers. Our tyrant offers them the following painful choice: *either* they be narrowly factual and confine their energies to surveys and inventories with a minimum of interpretation, *or* they study geography from only a certain viewpoint—say, phenomenological, Marxist, or feminist. How will

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geographers choose? Would not the majority opt for constricted empiricism as the less oppressive?

A fantasy, far from being incoherent, may exhibit infrangible logic within its own frame of reference. What makes this logic potentially a fantasy—a point of departure for flights into unreality—is the narrowness of the frame and its lack of resonance in multi-layered experiences and contexts. Thus understood, fantasy again tends to isolate the self. This self may be individual or collective. An individual self, isolated in a rigid set of personally constructed beliefs, may not be able to survive. A group self, even if it is isolated, can; indeed it may well prosper. Within such a group, members are bound to each other by a faith that is all the more readily shared because its tenets are simple and internally coherent. Moreover, a faith undistracted by qualifications and subtlety is likely to be embraced with heightened fervor.

Fantasy is innate to the human condition. Our exceptional imaginativeness distinguishes us from other animal species. With imagination we respond to the pressures of external reality; we apprehend it, probe it, and in doing so, extend its compass. However, as the imagination reaches toward the excesses and incoherence of fantasy, it can also delude, enchain, and isolate. Culture is a product of imagination and fantasy. In the course of liberating us from the more burdensome constraints of nature, culture itself becomes a prison. An ebullient project of the mind can turn, with surprising ease, into its captor, all the more powerful because it can seem, contradictorily, both nature's own truth, thus commanding obedience, and the unique creation of founding heroes and ancestors, thus commanding loyalty.

A principal argument in favor of fantasy is that it can sometimes set us free from established culture. What fantasy envisages may be bizarre, yet a surpassing strangeness serves the cause of a larger truth if it is able to lift even for a moment deadening layers of habit and belief—including those that make us forget our standing as mortals in a vast and alien universe. So while some mechanical dragon unfolds its wings or starships do their special-effects battle in a grade-B movie, a man who attends the show with his grandchildren might suddenly find himself reflecting on his own true situation in time and space—"a speck of consciousness now into its seventh decade, a mortal body poised to rejoin the minerals." Beneath his chair is not just the floor sticky with chewing gum, but "the curvature of the immense earth" (Updike 1987, 224–25). We need an occasional reminder that human reality is not wholly bounded by the tragicomedies of socioeconomic life. Such a reminder can come from a surprising source, if only we open ourselves to the implications of fantasy.

As Oscar Wilde (1987, 1028) once said, "A Map of the World that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at . . . ." The map depicts reality, but it is of little use, for it cannot stimulate action, unless it has, in some sense, Utopia on it. One of the proper and moral uses of fantasy is to envisage the good—a possible world that does justice not only to human yearnings but to human potential. Realism, as a popular philosophical posture, has a tendency to become a matter of "sticking to the facts," by which is usually meant "sticking to the harsh or drab facts." Realism thus understood is like a map without Utopia, uninspiring and hence useless for the purpose of human betterment. A popular children's story eloquently states the case for bold imagination, not so much because it manifests a healthy and natural exuberance as because the boldly imagined *may* turn out to be true—more true than what is presented in a narrowly-conceived realism.

In the story, a witch holds captive a boy and a girl, Prince Rilian, and Puddlegum the marsh-wiggle, in her sunless Underworld. She asserts that "there is no other world but mine." She recognizes the existence of her lamp, which she can see, but laughs to scorn her captives' belief in the reality of the sun. She admits that cats exist, but mocks at their belief in Aslan, a lion. Puddlegum, who is himself rather pessimistic, makes the following heroic reply to the witch:

> "One word, Ma'am . . . . One word. All you've been saying is quite right, I shouldn't wonder . . . . [Still,] suppose we have only dreamed, or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours *is* the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that's a funny thing when you come to think of it. We're just babies making up a game, if you're right. But four babies playing a game can make a play-world that licks your real world hollow. That's why I'm going to stand by the play-world. I'm on Aslan's side, even if there isn't any

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Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia. So, thanking you kindly for your supper, and if these two gentlemen and the young lady are ready, we're leaving your court at once and setting out in the dark to spend our lives looking for Overland" (Lewis 1965, 156–57; Wilson 1988, 146).

Concluding Remark

Among the aspirations of art, one is to depict the world of common objects as they appear to the human eye. The European art tradition, we have noted, has been exceptional in its sustained interest in realism. For this reason, geographers have found its works especially valuable as lessons in seeing properly and vividly nature, landscape, and human figures (Rees 1978; Osborne 1988). Nevertheless, the principal purpose of art is not accurate representation, but to create—to add objects of eloquence or power in the world. Whereas the practice of art might be a human universal and a good measure of a culture's vitality, realism in art is clearly not necessary to a people's physical survival, or to their culture's vitality. An imagination that does not defer to the constraints of the real (i.e., fantasy) has always been and is now more than ever an inspiration of art. The problem of modern art is that its creations may become so much the encapsulated and encapsulating fantasy of artists that they quite fail to communicate beyond coteries.

History, as an effort to narrate the past with due attention to the known facts, is an intellectual taste, and it also appears to have served the function of maintaining certain kinds of society. But knowing history is not necessary to a people's survival, or even to their culture's efflorescence. Hunter-gatherers, such as the Mbuti pygmies of the Zaire rain forest and the Marindinese of Papua New Guinea, have no interest in the past at all, and yet they are a vital people: their rituals and ceremonies have deep meaning for them even though these lack the support of tales reaching into the past (Turnbull 1965, 164, 166; Baal 1966, 182, 206). Most complex and socially-stratified societies, nonliterate and literate, do show an awareness of the past, and they may consciously seek to draw strength from it. However, this strength, which feeds on emotion, is more likely to come from fabulous genealogies and myths than from meticulous history, with its usual lack of pristine heroes and villains, its ironies and ambiguities.

Of the three intellectual-imaginative projects—art, history, and geography—geography is most clearly driven by the demands of survival and livelihood. Knowing places, knowing how to negotiate space, knowing the resources of one's environment, where and how far apart they are, knowing the rhythms of nature, their constraints and opportunities, are the sort of mental equipment every human individual and every society must have. Art, when it seeks to be realistic and to provide knowledge similar to that of empirical science, turns naturally to geography—that is, to showing the embeddedness of life in an environment or landscape. And history too seems more real, better grounded, when its narratives are intimately tied to space and place—to such things as weather, the conditions of the road, and the location of markets.

Geography, however, is not just basic knowledge acquired from the necessities of living; it is also an intellectual-imaginative project. In carrying out such a project, geographers themselves are subject to fantasy in the various senses I have explored. Thus, an inordinate and exclusive attention to "hard facts" and a tendency to disregard the mixture or realism and fantasy that lies at the psychic core of all humans can make their products seem surreal or fantastic. In the name of realism itself, geographers must pay close attention to the indubitable fact, powerfully revealed to us by literature and the arts, that humans are emotional as well as rational beings, that they have an imagination which soars from time to time into self-deluding fantasy, and that these traits direct human energies which have transformed (for good and ill) the face of the earth.

Fantasy is imagination carried to excess, but unless one risks excess, one cannot be said to have fully exercised one's imagination. Geography, as the inventory of resources and the spatial display of socioeconomic facts, responds to the practical needs of society in the present and the immediate future. It serves society in an unambiguous way, and hence it will always be supported, even generously, as society itself becomes more complex and difficult to manage. Geography, however, is also an imaginative project. Its practitioners are under obligation to envisage not only the immediate future but also a possible and desirable future—to envis-

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age, in short, a good place—the "utopia" on the map that can simultaneously console and lure. When visionary reformers and social engineers try to picture the good place, their imagination tends to fly into Eden, paradise, the classless society, a world of technological wonders, or some other oversimplified realm. This is the danger in utopian thinking that realists have warned us of. Geographers, like other idea-driven people, are also tempted to take such flights, but perhaps they are better able to resist excess because their probes into the future are anchored by tradition in the concrete realities of particular places, which are the points of convergence for the operations of nature, economy, and aspiring human individuals.

Notes

1. "Realism" has, of course, a variety of meanings. In logic, its opposite is nominalism; in metaphysics, its opposite in idealism. In politics, realism has the connotation of cynicism. In this paper, realism is the "Realism of Representation" (Lewis 1961), a concept used primarily in literary and art criticism, and its opposite is fantasy.
2. The smaller a bounded object the more likely it is to be depicted realistically in art in different cultural traditions: a single plant, for example, or a single artifact such as a pot or a spear. Far less common is the attempt to present the likeness of a whole arrangement of objects such as a landscape. The idea of landscape—that special perceptual organization of nature—is, however, easily understood and appreciated once it is introduced. The skill to depict it realistically takes longer. Nevertheless, a people such as the Australian aborigines, whose own tradition does not include landscape painting, can take to the art with alacrity and great skill. Tourists are easily misled into believing that the beautiful paintings of Australian landscape by native artists are a profound expression of aboriginal culture.
3. I am tempted to see a parallel between the irreconcilable schools or fashions of art and those of human geography, now that positivism no longer totally dominates the field: phenomenology, existentialism, Marxism, neo-Marxism, structuralism, situationism, structurationism, deconstructionism, idealism, realism, etc.

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